

The Kannada Tagore; Shivarama Karanth

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In the summer of 1994 I was in the town of Ranibennur at the invitation of a local environmental group. They had just won a major award and wished me to share in the celebrations. The road to the meeting hall was lined with banners that read: 'To celebrate the Indira Gandhi Paryavaran Puruskar and Dr Shivarama Karanth's ninetieth birthday.' This was a happy juxtaposition, for Karanth had been a pioneer of environmentalism in South India, and had even been the first petitioner in a case the group in Ranibennur had filed in the Supreme Court, against a notorious polluting firm of the town.

The meeting was entertaining, not least because Karanth spoke. Afterwards we repaired to the travellers' bungalow. There I got chatting with the great Kannada writer's chauffeur. With a historian's interest in dates, I asked him when precisely had his boss turned ninety. 'Actually, sir', he replied, 'he is almost ninety-two.' Then why are they celebrating the birthday now, I wondered. 'Because they also need their chance', he said.

'They' were the people of Ranibennur, and 'their chance' was the opportunity to pay tribute to a man who was more than a legend in his lifetime. It turned out that for the past two years the writer and his driver had been on the road. The white Ambassador that brought Karanth to Ranibennur had the previous fortnight taken him to

Tumkur, for a meeting to 'Celebrate the Kannada Sahitya Sammelana and Dr Karanth's ninetieth birthday.' In Mysore, the birthday was clubbed with the opening of a new girls' school in Gadag with the opening of a new science laboratory. Nowhere was the event celebrated by itself. That would have offended Karanth, and in any case it was easy enough to find an excuse provided by one of his many spheres of achievement. A new dance academy would do in one place, a film studio in another, a library in a third. One way or another, the people of every decent-sized hamlet in Karnataka found a way to honour their man.

A cat, it is said, has nine lives, Vishnu had ten avatars. But Shivarama Karanth had as many as sixteen careers. These were: nationalism, social reform, commerce, journalism, photography, acting, dance, painting, music, cinema, experiments in education, rural up-lift, the popularization of science (through a multi-volume encyclopaedia designed and written wholly by himself), the writing of novels (as many as forty-five), the writing of plays (not less than ninety), and environmentalism. This list is not necessarily exhaustive, and the man did not necessarily follow only one career at a time.

Shivarama Karanth was born on the 10th of October, 1902, in the village of Kota in Dakshina Kannada district. His early life is described in his autobiography, *Ten Faces of a Crazy Mind*, skilfully translated into English by H.Y. Sharada Prasad. *Ten Faces* is as heterodox as the man himself: unstructured, occasionally meandering, yet plush with epigrams and witty asides and philosophical insights. It is that altogether rare thing, a work of literary merit which is also a work of social history. Like most other autobiographies, this was written to pre-empt a future biographer. As Karanth put it, 'I do not desire to be killed by others' pens. I shall take my own life.'

As a boy, Shivarama Karanth's 'attitude to studies was one of disinterest'. He dropped out of college without taking a degree. As he put it, 'I did not have to experience the indigestion of high marks.' Still, he was lucky in his teachers. A middle-school teacher taught him to do interesting things with his hands; to garden and to weave mats, for example. In high school, one teacher inculcated an appreciation of Yakshagana; another opened up the library of Kannada literature to him.

Growing up, Karanth was contemptuous of the 'Vanity', the 'tyranny', and the 'narrowness' of his Brahmin upbringing. He was disenchanted by his visits to Kashi and Prayag, places he found crowded, dirty, and full of grasping priests and *pandas*. Notably, the one holy place which 'gave satisfaction and was not culturally jarring was Dakshinেশwar ... I went to the Panchavati garden. That was the field of the Paramhansa's spiritual exertions. My feelings for Nature and my reverence for the sage led me to find more peace there than I did at Brindavan.'

While turned off by faith and studies, Karanth was enchanted by the arts. He was gripped by the travelling theatre companies that came to his neck of rural Karnataka — these the southern equivalents of the Bengali *jatras*. It was under their inspiration that Karanth taught himself music. The process of self-training he later described with characteristic wryness:

It was a fellow student who taught me to shriek, co shriek in some recog-nisable raga . . . There was an open space near our house called naribena (jackal field). I used to go there at dawn and late at night to do my screaming. . . . Once a jackal came within ten yards of me and looked at me as if to throw a challenge. I am not joking; it did happen. To this day I feel that music-learners should find a plate beyond the town limits.

Eventually, Karanth became quite accomplished, not merely as a singer but also as a connoisseur and composer. His great work for Yakshagana, the traditional dance-drama of the west coast, was helped immeasurably by the musical skills and innovations he brought to it. Some of the most attractive and sensitively delineated characters in his fiction are musicians and music teachers.

In college Karanth also became a 'great consumer of political harangues'. The non-co-operation movement inspired him to leave his degree halfway and take to the promotion of spinning, this at a time when 'patriotism had not yet become a profitable industry'.

In his mid twenties, Karanth started a correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi. Sadly, we don't have his side of the exchange. From the letters printed in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, we get a bare idea of what was on Karanth's mind. The topics alluded to in Gandhi's letters include the therapeutic value of *asanas* and *pranayamas* (Gandhi seemed sceptical), the life and ideals of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, and the moral life of actors. Of this last Gandhi seemed most sceptical: 'I should draw a sharp distinction between *kirtans* and theatricals. The question of theatricals is very serious, and as you seem to know all about the lives of actors, it may be as well for you to avoid the profession.'

A topic that preoccupied Karanth at this time, as it did Gandhi, was sex and marriage. Gandhi offered the view, presumably in answer to a query of Karanth's that wet dreams were 'undoubtedly harmful'; for they released seminal energy better 'husbanded and reserved for reproduction, when the latter is desired, or transmutation into spiri-tual

energy.’ In response to another question, Gandhi assured the young seeker that to promote widow marriage—as Karanth was then doing—was not inconsistent with *brahmacharya*. Still, he saw it as a concession to human frailty: ‘when I advocate the marriage of child widows, I presume that they want the pleasure which all animals seek and some human beings only can restrain themselves from seeking.’

The insinuation that brahmacharya was somehow superior to married life, Karanth came to reject, even as he disregarded the Mahatma’s advice to stay away from the theatre. But he continued to work in khadi and swadeshi for five years, till about 1927, by which time the ‘Nationalist Movement in our region was cold like stale porridge.’ Fortunately, Karanth had already started writing fiction—detective novels, to begin with—as well as plays.

While still in his twenties, Karanth acquired the taste for very long walks through the southern countryside. He would walk through forests and swim across rivers, carrying little, sleeping in disused temples or peasant homes. Some of these journeys were made for pleasure, others to educate himself about the culture, the ecology, -and the artistic traditions of his land.

When he came to plan a children’s encyclopaedia, in the 1930s, Karanth was dismayed by the ‘intellectual thinness’ of the Kannada country. There was a way out: he would research and write the thing himself. His *Bala Prapancha* was followed by his science encyclopaedia. Then, provoked by a badly produced government book, he researched and wrote an illustrated history of architecture. All these works were to have an enduring impact. There were also other, relatively minor literary productions, among them a translation into Kannada of *Hamlet*. His contributions to dance and fiction, by no means minor, I shall come to presently.

Shivarama Karanth married late, when he was well past thirty. In his memoirs he is reticent about telling us what first attracted his wife to him. All he tells us is that she was a gifted dancer, and from another caste. The lady was more forthright. Karanth, she recalled, was explaining to his troupe how to make costumes for the characters. As he began to cut colour paper in different shapes, Leela’s eyes ‘observed the movement of his fingers. What speed! What skill! I stood there, completely lost, looking at his hands. ... At that moment, I felt an intense desire to be near those hands . . . What I yearned for, for the first time in my life, was to possess those artistic hands of Karanth’.

The critic C.N. Ramachandran, who quotes these words, also quotes an appreciation of Leela Karanth by her second son, Ulhas. ‘It was our mother who shaped Karanth’s life’, remarks Ulhas: ‘She was the backbone of all his endeavours. She was also quite well read, and she dedicated all of her talents to her husband. She took care of all household responsibilities. I remember now that mother also, like our father, was an atheist; and she used to read and explain Bertrand Russell for us.’

Karanth’s standing was not hindered by his appearance. In his later years, especially, he made for a striking figure, dressed in spotless white dhoti and kurta, with an impressive face framed by a silver mane combed backwards. He was charismatic and, it must be admitted, at times intimidating. As his associate L.S. Seshagiri Rao has written, he ‘could be brusque and withering’, and, especially as he grew older, ‘impatient of criticism, and dogmatic’.

Some admirers liked to call Karanth 'Kadala Tiratha Bhargava', the Lord of the Coastal Lands. This seems to be a mistaken title, not least because it was originally given to Parusarama, that fervent upholder of the Brahmin way of life. I prefer what Sharada Prasad once called him; 'The King Elephant of the Southern Forests'. Like the king elephant Karanth dominated the landscape by the sheer bulk of his achievement. Like him, he roamed wherever his fancy took him. And like him, he could go sometimes into periods of well-directed rage.

II

In the 1970s Shivarama Karanth moved from Puttur—where he had lived for forty years—to the village of Saligrama. In September 1989 I visited Karanth at his now no-longer-new home. After the mon-soon, the countryside was at its greenest and most glorious. The great man's house was a contrast: a large and inelegant structure, painted white outside but with the rooms inside very dark. We spoke of his campaign against nuclear energy. Sadly, I have lost my notes of the meeting, but I do recall his concern for the 'integrity of life', for life natural as well as human.

Not long after I met Karanth, I was looking at some old microfilms in Delhi of the now-defunct nationalist paper, the *Bombay Chronicle*. Searching for an article by Verrier Elwin, this headline unexpectedly popped up: 'Yakshgana Art, a Real Approach to Masses: Troupe Gives Demonstrations of Their Talent in Bombay. The text below told of a performance by a Yakshagana group from South Kanara, followed by a talk by Karanth on the history of the art form. He had spoken of the dance's fusion of rural life with a mass audience, of its forms of dress and makeup, and of recent innovations in music and presentation.

This, then, was the island city's first exposure to Yakshagana, as reported in the *Bombay Chronicle* of 28 November 1936. Later, I came across a reference to the trip in Karanth's memoirs. 'I gave quite a pompous lecture in English. It was attended by people of Bombay's upper crust. A few ladies wore so much paint they could have gone on the stage.'

I remember reading that faded microfilm with an almost indescribable feeling of wonder. This was 1989, and I had just interviewed Karanth about his environmental campaigns. Now, I was learning of his pioneering work in the promotion of Yakshagana, as described in a newspaper report fifty-three years ago. I have known many remarkable Indians, but this experience might help explain why for me Karanth commands a place all his own.

If one were forced to rank Karanth's multiple careers, one might—reluctantly—allow that Yakshagana and the writing of novels should share first place. He both revived and redefined the dance-form of the West Coast. He rediscovered many ragas that were traditionally part of the Yakshagana repertoire but had fallen into disuse. He did away with dialogue, making songs and dance do its work instead. He added new instruments, linked dance rhythms and music rhythms, and searched for and trained talented young artists. Most significantly, he brought down the average time of a performance from eight to three hours, thus allowing Yakshagana to make its peace with the rushed modern world.

In the field of fiction, Karanth was prodigiously active, in part because he did not bother unduly about theory or technique. If you have something of your own to say', he remarked, 'technique will come of its own accord. If you are true to your experience and the values that your own life has taught you, if they are not borrowed values, what you say will find the best form.'

The first of his novels to have a wider impact was *Choma's Drum* (translated into English by U.R. Kalkur) Its central character was an Untouchable whose dream, or fantasy, was to cultivate his own plot of land. Meanwhile, he worked in the fields of a landlord half his age, his children labouring with him. He drowned his sorrows in drink, and by playing his drum. Stick in hand, he 'coaxed out of the [drum] the monotonous sound, *damadhamma dakadhakka*. There was never a new rhythm, never a new timbre in the sound. But he played it with all the pride of a mridangam pandit.'

This early novel, like the ones to follow, is replete with descriptions and images of nature: of animals, trees, insects, and landscapes. There is a vivid account, drawn undoubtedly from personal experience, of a walk from the coast to a coffee plantation on the crest of the ghats. But the human world is described with a biting irony. Consider these samples: 'The hut was his own—when not claimed by rains and storms'. Their dinner would be before dark, for no lamp had ever been lit in Choma's hut. What precious thing did they have to do at night to need a lamp?' 'Plantation debts are like plantation malaria: once in their grip no release till death.'

Choma's Drum has been compared to Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. The novel it reminded me of, however, is Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, which too was published in the 1930s. There a tribal has his land taken away; here a Dalit can never own land. Both look to the forest for sustenance but are thwarted by the state. Both are forced to seek consolation in drink, both forced to burden their young with their sorrows. One novel is set in Orissa, the other in coastal Karnataka. Separated by five hundred miles of territory, the novels are united by a mood, a moment, and a movement: the Gandhian struggle for social reform.

Another of Karanth's novels available in English is a story of courtesan life, translated by H.Y. Sharada Prasad under the title, *The Woman of Basrur*. The rendering is feminist, but without advertising itself as such: it is sensitive and subtle without ever descending into stridency. There is a noticeable empathy with the courtesan: with her desire for acclaim, her devotion to her art, the haphazard life she leads in roaming theatres. Karanth penetratingly probes her hopes, fantasies and suspicions. The fickleness and animal feelings of her patrons are described with dry wit.

The novel spans four generations. Its core is a memoir of the legendary courtesan Manjula, found in an attic by her grandniece: this, the serendipitous discovery of forgotten texts, is a literary device more recently made popular in English fiction by A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. The tale is told entirely from the woman's point of view. 'To earn a moment of joy, a woman had to undergo a hundred moments of suffering.' 'But can a courtesan's daughter buy, off the shelf, someone in whom money and virtue are combined?'

When a lover gifts Manjula a bracelet, she 'felt as if soaked in syrup'. At other times she yearned for human understanding: 'silk is soft to the touch, it is true, but can silk

soothe the ache of the heart?’ There is a brilliant description of her feeling let down by a patron who had but one thing on his mind.

I thought I would be like a basket of bright and fragrant flowers offered in music. Instead I was the goat sacrificed to the demon. He was a hungry animal and I was only a lump of flesh. From the moment he set foot in my rooms he acted as if I was someone without a mind and feelings.

Manjula’s last lover is the swami of a *mutt*, who would visit her under cover of darkness and in disguise. This is a characteristic comment on the hypocrisy of an enforced asceticism: Karanth had little time for the forms and pieties of his ancestral religion. The critic C.N. Ramachandran observes that Karanth’s novels are invariably biased towards women and against holy men: these he saw as humbugs, or as having run away from home to escape their responsibilities. And yet, in a bitter paradox, when he died in December 1997, this great anti-ritualist and rationalist was cremated amidst the chanting of Vedic hymns.

As both Gopalakrishna Adiga and U.R. Anantha Murty have pointed out, the strengths of Karanth’s fiction are also its limitations. ‘What strikes us most’, writes Adiga, ‘is his sincerity and earnestness.’ The characters, dialogues, situation and story are ‘so authentic that [they] become a part of our own living experience.’ However, there is in Karanth’s writings ‘throughout a lack of imagery. Only when a novelist’s intellect, feelings, contemplation, values, dreams, memories at the conscious and unconscious levels—only when all these ingredients are cooked to a delicacy, does it create a new experience for the reader.’ Likewise, Anantha Murty comments that in becoming his people’s ‘most authentic writer’, Karanth had to rigorously exclude the aesthetic and poetic dimensions from his fiction. Since humans for him are the product of specific social relationships, he cannot write about the intensity of mystical experience or the agonies of the alienated individual. His novels are rich, readable, authentic; yet they ‘do not contain invisible eddies that catch the reader and draw him into subliminal depths.’

III

The bravest act of my writing career was to suggest in the pages of a Calcutta newspaper that a Kannada writer bore comparison with Rabindranath Tagore. I made the claim in 1995, and took care not to visit Kolkata for some time thereafter. But let me make so bold now as to revive it. For Shivarama Karanth was the most influential Kannada novelist, a noted playwright, a dancer and choreographer, an encyclopaedist, social reformer, patriot and educationist. His myriad-mindedness inspired a proverb in Kannada: *Aadu muttada, soppilla, Karantharu maadada kelasavilla*. (There is vegetation that a goat doesn’t eat, but there is no work that Karanth has not done.)

The range of Shivarama Karanth’s achievements bears comparison with Tagore’s. So, more intriguingly, does the pattern of his life, and the choice of his particular passions. Consider the following.

Like Tagore, Karanth wrote as much for the young as for adults. Generations of Kannada schoolchildren grew up on primers written by him. And he took care to have these well illustrated: the painter he chose for the purpose being K.K. Hebbar, in this respect the exact Kannada equivalent of Nandalal Bose. His children’s encyclopaedias

were also attractively produced: he took many of the photos himself, and even had the colour separations done in Germany.

Karant was proud of his work for children. Apart from the books he wrote for them, for some years he ran an experimental school with its own kitchen, fields, and menagerie. The children were all boarders and paid no fees. Much time was spent outside the classroom, in the forests and on the river or sea, and in watching or participating in theatre and music. The great Kannada writers, singers and dancers would all come visiting. In the school Karant himself was always accompanied by a huge red Malabar squirrel, its tail stylishly draped around his neck.

Like Tagore, again, Karant was an environmentalist before the time of environmentalism. He, too, was made by the gorgeous land-scapes in which he was reared. 'I am in love with my region, and dote on its landscape', he once wrote.

I could not understand why such a green stretch of land was made so grey in books of geography . . . The beach at Karwar would enslave anyone. The crowning glory of Malnad is the Jog Falls. I have not kept count of the number of times I have visited it. I he gorge and the precipice are unfailingly alluring. I have sat, soaked, eaten and slept on the banks of the Sharavati, and romped on the sand. I have loved the violet-coloured moss on the boulders there.

In the 1950s Karant worked for the plantation and preservation of trees and forests. In the 1970s and 1980s he launched campaigns against polluting industries, destructive dams, and—the ultimate threat to human and natural life—the nuclear establishment. In 1979 Karant inspired a popular movement against a hydroelectric project on the Bedthi River, in Uttara Kannada. The dam would have inundated much rich farmland, and also thousands of hectares of rich tropical forests. Characteristically, Karant was not content with opposition; if they thought the dam harmful, he told the agitating farmers, they must reform their own wayward agricultural practices, must be more sparing in their use of chemicals and more conserving in their use of water and *energy*.

In 1982 he translated the first Citizens' Report on the Indian Environment. Then, after the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, he led a popular movement against the siting of a nuclear plant in Northern Karnataka. Karant even stood for a Lok Sabha election on an independent 'green' ticket: although he did not make a single campaign speech, and he had not the money or muscle power of the established political parties, he still got 60,000 votes.

Karant's ecological sensibilities also found their way into his fiction. The first pages of *The Woman of Basrur* speak of the landscape and of how man has made and unmade it. The town of Basrur had 'reservoirs built by the pious of an earlier age. They are fed by the monsoon rains, but in summer they turn yellow—or green, when the moss shows through. And the stone steps around them are in disrepair, looking like the misshapen teeth of the aged. The river that flowed clown the hills and past the town had 'palms growing in profusion for miles together on both banks, like unmarried girls lined up to welcome a bridal couple, swaying in the winds, unconscious of their own comeliness.'

Once a thriving port, trading to Portuguese Goa and beyond, the town was now derelict.

All the glory that remains in Basrur is the glory of green—the bright green of the tops of palms, the light green of paddy squares which stretch from the outskirts of the town up to the sea, the deep green of the patches of sweet-potato and chilli. . . . , and the still deeper green of the copal trees which stand stately, looking down upon bush and thorn.

The parallels between the lives continue. Like Tagore, Karanth experienced acute personal sorrow—the death of a beloved child, the suffering of his wife from depression. Karanth too accepted honours from the state and, in a moment of principled anger, returned them. Tagore gave back his knighthood after the massacre at Jallianawala Bagh. Forty-six years later, Karanth returned his Padma Bhushan in protest against the imposition of the Emergency. As he wrote to the president of India,

In 1922, I like many others, joined Gandhiji in the Non-Cooperation Movement in order to serve my motherland. I felt I was doing my bit in fighting for the freedom of India.

We all felt happy when freedom came to India in 1947 and our land became a democracy. Its Constitution gave me joy. But it was not so long. As years passed, the Fundamental Rights assured to the people were removed bit by bit, through amendments, negating the assurance given by the very leaders who took oaths to maintain them . . .

Today, at the age of 74, I hang my head in shame at the turn of events. I don't believe that a single soul has a right to bypass human freedoms under any cloak.

Though for decades I have refrained from active politics, I feel impelled to protest against such indignities done to the people of India. As such, to calm my own conscience at least, I feel impelled to surrender the title to your Government.

May truth prevail over untruth.

Both Tagore and Karanth travelled widely abroad and wrote about their experiences. (One had family money and generous patrons, the other did what he could with a lean purse.) Both were always experimenting with new ideas, new careers. All their geese did not turn out swans. Where Tagore failed or exceeded himself is for the Bengalis to say. But of Karanth it can be safely said that he was a lousy painter and a worse film-maker. He made what is possibly the first Kannada feature film, in the 1930s—fortunately perhaps, the cans of film perished in a fire at the end of the shooting. Years later he made another feature. A young Kannada writer who otherwise reveres Karanth and his works told me simply that it was a ‘horrible film—*horrible*. Apparently, Karanth would shout ‘action’, and turn his eyes away from the shot. He would call ‘stop’ when he felt the dialogue had run its course. When I first compared Tagore to Karanth, I thought I was being novel. But then H.Y. Sharada Prasad alerted me to the fact that another writer had long ago made the same claim. As it happens, this writer was a Bengali, and a rather learned one—Suniti Kumar Chatterji. However, as Sharada Prasad points out, while the two men were alike in the many-sidedness of their genius, they differed in one respect. ‘There was a grandeur about both, but Tagore was the sage, a modern-day *rishi*, a man who gathered disciples around him and relished his title of Gurudev. Karanth remained a fierce individual, a lone tusker who sought no followers, built no sect or ism or institution, and spurned the role of a preceptor.’

Recalling his student years, Karanth wrote that his mind then was 'full of Swadeshi, social reform and Shantiniketan'. Where the prescribed texts in college were the works of Kipling, he chose to read Tagore instead. He wrote to C.F. Andrews, asking whether he should study in Santiniketan. Andrews encouraged him to go, but his father vetoed the idea, apparently on the grounds that Bengali Brahmins were so degraded that they even ate fish. A peculiar reason, but perhaps in the end we should be grateful that Karanth did not go to Santiniketan. For he might have fallen fatally under the spell of Tagore, to become a faithful disciple instead of what he became unaided: his own man.